



Moviemaking Required at CCH

by Alexis Buryk



Jodie Foster stars in *Flightplan*, directed by Columbia College Hollywood alum Robert Schwentke.

A school for moviemakers with serious ambitions, Columbia College Hollywood offers the equipment, the courses and the instructors to prepare young artists who believe they're ready for a rigorous and rewarding learning environment. **MM** chatted with CCH's director of administration, Mark Stratton, dean of academics, Dr. Jim Lundstrom, and dean of students, Gene Satlin, about the Columbia College Hollywood advantage.

Alexis Buryk (MM): *Your name highlights a critical part of Columbia College's appeal: Hollywood. What separates you from other film schools in the Los Angeles area?*

Columbia College Hollywood (CCH):

Unlike other film schools in the area that are part of a larger university, Columbia College Hollywood specializes solely in film and television production. This is the key to a unique educational experience that is more like a conservatory than a college.

The liberal arts classes are spread out over four years rather than front-loaded in the first two. From day one, students get hands-on, practical training in film and television work, while earning their BA or AA degree.

At CCH, creating a reel is as important as the diploma. Some film schools allow only a small percentage of their students to make a senior thesis film. They rationalize this by saying that the entertainment industry is competitive and that film school should model this "reality." CCH has a different philosophy.

Making films at CCH is not a privilege, it is a requirement. To hone technical and creative skills through repeated participation in the production process, to develop one's vision over time, with support and feedback from instructors and fellow students, and, when it is done, to sit with an audience and see one's ideas and work become reality on the screen is the greatest education possible for a moviemaker.

MM: *The proximity to Hollywood and its unparalleled resources for students of film must impact the way in which film is taught at CCH. What is your teaching philosophy and how is it implemented?*

CCH: CCH is about hands-on learning. At Columbia College Hollywood, we believe that the best film or videomaker is one who understands all aspects of the process: What is involved in writing a script, the kinds of choices a cinematographer confronts, how actors reveal subtext, how sound and music can enliven and transform a scene, the way images are assembled in an editing room. The best way to understand these things is by experiencing them firsthand. The three-tier core curriculum ensures that all our students will have exposure to the essential crafts of moviemaking and television.

We are also about storytelling: What do you want to say and how do you want to say it? Movies are not just collections of pretty pictures; they are stories told visually. They are about ideas and emotions. But in order to tell a story, you must have something to say. The CCH experience fuses professional studies with liberal arts, because exposure to ideas stimulates personal growth and expression.

Survey classes offer exposure to film and television history. Through them students discover the wide range of subjects and techniques available to them as moviemakers and come to understand their place in a larger historic and global context.

In general, the small class size and high level of personal attention from instructors and fellow students alike translates into a custom-tailored college experience that is simply not possible at many larger institutions. In addition, this spirit of intimacy fosters the development of relationships that will continue long after graduation.

We also encourage all of our students to pursue “industry” internships while they are in school. It is a way to widen their network, and it is one of the best ways to secure employment once they leave school. One of the chief reasons for students to come to “Hollywood” for their education is to have the experience of working in Hollywood.

MM: *What do you look for in an instructor? Who are some current and past faculty members and how have they shaped CCH and its students?*

CCH: At Columbia College Hollywood we look for instructors who are dynamic teachers, great communicators and those who maintain active careers in the industry. This helps to ensure that our students will be taught the most current techniques by successful working professionals. Many times these professionals bring not just their own personal expertise, but their industry contacts in to support CCH. In the post-tenure world of today’s academia, quite a few of our instructors also teach at other film schools including AFI, Loyola and USC. We are very proud of the teaching caliber of our faculty and they, in turn, show terrific loyalty to CCH. So we tend to have long relationships with them.

Many faculty members have had an important impact on CCH and its students, among them Corey Allen, the Emmy-winning director and actor. (He played the teenager who went off the cliff in *Rebel Without a Cause*.) Allen is now retired from teaching, but in his years with us, he did much to shape our acting and directing classes. Student films are often noted for amateurish acting, partly because young directors are frequently more comfortable with cameras and equipment than they are with people. Professor Allen changed that at Columbia College Hollywood, and we carry on in his tradition.

Another area that has seen marked change is sound, and for that we can thank CCH alum-turned-instructor Amanda Kraus. Student films, however strong their look, are frequently undercut by poor sound quality. Ms. Kraus, besides being a successful editor and post sound supervisor herself, has single-handedly revamped the college’s sound curriculum, reshaping classes from production sound through post-production, sound design and mixing. Oscar-winning sound editor Joe Holsen is one of the new members of the department.

DP Charles H. Rose is the driving force behind CCH’s unique, hands-on cinematography department and current president of the Faculty Association. Past Association president Alan L. Gansberg is an Emmy-nominated writer who has played a major role in shaping our writing and producing curriculums.

MM: *What do you look for in a student? Who are some of your best-known alumni?*

CCH: We look for students with a great love of movies, vivid imaginations and the drive to tell stories visually. Our highest profile graduate at the moment is Robert Schwentke, director of the Fall blockbuster *Flightplan*, starring Jodie Foster. But Columbia College Hollywood has produced many successful entertainment industry professionals. These include young producer-directors Timothy Linh Bui and AJ Ripp; DPs Eagle Egilsson, Harry Charalambos and Jessica Gallant; Emmy-winning video operator Martin Domacasse; educator and assistant cameraman David E. Elkins; agent Rebecca Fayyad; location manager Anneli Oscarsson; stunt coordinator Hank Baumert; and editors Robert A. Ferretti and Nick Kypros, to name a few.

MM: *Many people from various backgrounds come to Los Angeles intent on a career in film. How do individual students impact the caliber of the student body as a whole? What is something unique that students will carry with them after graduating that they might not have without training at CCH?*

CCH: We are fortunate to have a wide variety of students from all over the world, from diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences, working together and enriching the shared educational experience that is Columbia College Hollywood.

Making movies is all about collaboration. Although competition is definitely a reality of the film business, most people succeed through the positive connections they make—and these connections begin at film school, where students crew on each other's projects, supporting, inspiring and challenging each other to be the best they can be. Even while in school, we have students who are already out in the working world, pitching projects, getting jobs and bringing classmates along with them.

Furthermore, because everyone at CCH has the opportunity to make a senior thesis project, much of the negative competitive element seen at other film schools has been eliminated, and students are encouraged to develop their unique cinematic voices in an atmosphere of healthy, creative working relationships. Feedback is an important part of any artist's education, but at CCH it is part of a process and not the final word of a selection committee that limits individual expression and ultimately just reflects the tastes of a few instructors.

MM: *Do students still participate in traditional "college" activities? Are there events and activities, both on and off-campus that will stimulate them both as moviemakers and people?*

CCH: CCH does not have the athletics or other extra-curricular activities that are such a big part of campus life at larger institutions. All of our official activities are focused on film and television, including the student film festivals, guest speakers and our annual graduation/homecoming weekend, which often includes screenings and discussions with successful industry professionals. We encourage students to participate in the many off-campus events and opportunities that the Los Angeles area affords. For many years the college has had a strong relationship with FIND (Film Independent, formerly the IFP Los Angeles), a great support group for independent moviemakers. We even offer a course in the Fall quarter every year that is structured around the FIND Producers Workshop Series. Students who take this course join the organization and continue to enjoy benefits throughout the year; Women in Film is another excellent networking group that students can join.

In addition, we are currently developing a student mentoring system (The Ambassador Program), for which we have high hopes. The point is to team new students with more experienced senior students, to nurture and assist them with their filmmaking projects.

MM: *What do you see in CCH's future? Are there any plans for new courses or improved facilities?*

CCH: Actually, we just completed a major renovation which we are very excited about—at last, CCH looks like the creative, dynamic, happening place it is. We brought in a Hollywood production designer, Mimi Gramatky, to create an environment that is itself a classroom: Everywhere students turn, they learn valuable lessons about style and color. Along with the overall facelift, she designed some beautiful standing sets—a pool hall and a New England living room—which the students are making nonstop use of in projects, from music videos to a wide range of narrative shorts. The goal was to create a stimulating and very "uninstitutional" environment, and she succeeded. But a school is always a work in progress, and this is only the beginning of our plans to make CCH a truly amazing educational experience on every level and the perfect setting from every angle for anyone with a camera.

For more information, visit www.columbiacollege.edu.

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